



Love Pentagon



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Chapter 1 by David

I raised my cool pint of ale to my lips with a slow, cautious hand as I surveyed the other suitors in the dimly lit country pub. First my gaze settled for a moment on the man to my right, a Frenchman. He was slouched over the bar with an easy grace. As I watched he slid a polished silver cigarette case from the pocket of his white tuxedo jacket and pulled out a tightly rolled French cigarette. He lit it and took a drag, letting wisps of smoke float out of his thin, moustachioed lips. At the table behind him, two young lads, Eton boys, by the looks of them, shared a whispered story over their scotch. In the far corner, a huge man in a heavily decorated military uniform rested his finely polished riding boots on his table next to three empty pint glasses.

We were all here for the same reason, I knew. Not a fortnight ago, Mr. Clifford Norrington, a dashing young aristocrat, had died. Tragic as the news was, it had created a wonderful opportunity for bachelors all across the country. Mr. Norrington had been betrothed to one of the most beautiful young women in all of England, Miss Evelyn Chattingsworth, sole heir to the fortune and titles of her father, the late Lord Humphrey Chattingsworth, Earl of Chattingshire. The news had drawn throngs of anxious suitors to the Chattingshire countryside, all pining for Miss Chattingsworth's hand. They flooded into the small country village, filling the inns, the taverns, the shops, the pubs, and even the church.

It was plain enough the four other men in the small pub that afternoon were suitors like myself: all the locals had either withdrawn to the quiet of their homes, or looked upon the visitors with the greatest annoyance as they went about their daily business. I eyed them again. "A French nobleman, surely; two college boys, posh as can be, no doubt; and an officer," I thought to myself,

"I don't stand a bloody chance!" However, these four suitors were all like me in the most fundamental way. While they were all chasing after a fortune, I was madly in love with her.

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Chapter 2 by William



I also had the advantage of advance reconnaissance. As a child, Miss Chattingsworth and her governess had once been disadvantaged by a carriage wheel that broke as they passed through our small village. Everyone turned out to help, of course, it's that kind of country folk and the glitter of gold coin did not make any difference. The town blacksmith went to work promptly to repair the wheel, but found to his dismay that the axle bearing on the cart had been damaged as well, requiring removal of the axle ... Recognizing that Miss C. and her governess were in for a long stay, the wife of the Mayor, also my mother, stepped forward and invited them to stay over in our house. The governess was greatly relieved, and proved so entertaining after dinner that, encouraged by an injudicious amount of wine, she began holding forth on subjects deemed unfit for children's ears. We were sent up to our rooms. Discouraged by the loss of a promising educational opportunity, I got out my folio and was determining to make further progress in maths when there was a quiet tapping on my door. It was indeed Miss C., who was hoping that I would provide her company in the upstairs sitting room while she viewed pictures using the fine new stereograph that she had received on her birthday. I of course regretfully abandoned my maths and rushed to the succor of a distressed damsel, and spent several hours sitting close together in the chaise lounge with our eyes fixed on the stereograph while we talked about what the governess had been saying, and while our hands wandered elsewhere. Hearing footsteps on the stair, we adjusted our situation, showed my father her wonderful toy, and were sent off to bed without any remonstrance. As we have never had a private moment together since that elysian night, I cannot speak for Miss Chattingsworth, but I gave my heart away and have left it with her for three decades. Perhaps she knows. Perhaps not.

Chapter 3 by Windlion



Call me a damn lucky fellow. I won't object, other than to say luck has a way of following preparation.

When the carriage returning Miss Chattingsworth from visiting her sister stopped at the little-known inn south of her estate, I was there with only a few of the other hounds on the hunt. We met for a nightcap and mutual congratulation on our intelligence work vis. the almost certain location where Miss C.'s coach would pause to refresh the horses and avoid the need for a stop

in town.

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Curiously, all but one of the fish were green around the gills. Captain

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and he was looking a bit

In any case, I was standing there with him when the coach rolled up. The coachman handed down Miss C. and her maidservant so that they could take a bit of a stretch, and the two of us immediately offered our best bows.

She busied herself with her maid, though, leaning their heads together and chattering gaily. Surely they had been doing nothing else for the entire trip?

I expected nothing more than the opportunity to refresh my memories of her, the bustle and clatter of the innyard not being the best for courtly conversation. Yet I was mistaken, and nearly thrown off balance, she recognized and stepped over to greet me!

"Why, Mister Armstead! It seems we last met in similar circumstance. At least this time," she smiled, "my coach wheel is undamaged."

"My lady, honored that you recall that happy weekend so long ago. It seems only yesterday to me." A weak response, she had caught me flat-footed. My competition, however, was giving me the demon eye, so perhaps it was not that bad.

She laughed, "Ah, those were gay times, my friend, and much better than I have had at late. We must get together and share some tales."

Have to keep up here, hell of a thing to miss the boat for being too slow to board. "There is nothing that would keep me from a chance to do so, milady." Soulfully said, with an open and earnest look.

"Excellent! Are you available for tea this afternoon, say at half past three?"

That knocked me down. "At ... half past three, you say?" Recover quickly, you fool, the competition is watching! "Of course, milady! I will be there without fail."

"Wonderful!" She clapped her hands in delight. "Oh, I hope you don't mind if we set aside the bother of formal wear, being old friends? I doubt that Janice and I will have our trunks unpacked by then."

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My competition is definitely down for the count, and I can stretch for air as well. "Everything as you wish, Miss Chatting."

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I had been told that she had grown up to be a strong-minded woman, and not one to tolerate condescending menfolk. It would seem so, and yet she is most collegial with her servant. Clearly, she is a woman who is less bound by custom than by her own will.

Chapter 4 by Windlion



Word travels fast, but my borrowed horse traveled faster. I was able to get a bath poured and my best shirt pressed before the news of Miss Chattingsworth's invitation made its way into town, and was back out into the woods before the unlucky oafs discovered that they had been tossed like pawns off the playing board by the queen and her knight.

I thought it best to spend the middle of the day in restful solitude, lest someone get excited enough to challenge me to a duel or come up with another delaying tactic. As it was, I arrived at the Chattingsworth manor with precisely twenty minutes to spare, perfectly groomed and well rested.

The doorman and the Lady's maid — Janice? yes, Janice is her name — met me and invited me into the sitting room. "Mister Armistead, we are so glad that you have arrived so promptly!" she said with a dazzling smile. "Word of some disturbances in the town made us fear that you might be detained."

"Ah! You are too kind to be concerned for me, Miss — I'm sorry?"

She blushed. "*You* are too kind to concern yourself with a maid's surname, sir, but I give it to you freely with the expectation that my mistress will introduce us properly. I am Owain's daughter —"

"Then, my pleasure, verch Owain." My grasp of Welsh patronymics pleased her, and added more strength to her smile. "But to continue, if I may?" But she raised her hand, concentrating, and then smiled.

"I would welcome hearing your tale, messire, but perhaps my mistress would also. May I have your permission to go and see if she is ready to join us?"

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I bowed, smiling. She bowed, also smiling, and then said, "Thank you, well here's old boy, I thought, for I knew that I

Miss verch Owain,

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interesting, unlikely that her birth name was so foreign to Wales as Janice. A mystery for another time. I turned to greet the the Lady of the House.

"My dear Mister Armistead! Do I dare embrace you without fear of your wandering hands?"

Egad, unhorsed before I was even out of the gate! "Many years have passed since that day, milady, but I hope that my hands have never been unwelcome visitors? I hold myself accountable for their behavior, in any case." And I did, placing them gently on her shoulders when she leaned forward for to lightly and briefly lean her head on my shoulder.

This is going so well. Miss C is smiling with stars in her yes. I am smiling. The daughter of Owain has a curious smile, also, as she takes a platter from a servant, dismisses him and brings it to us.

"Good Mister Armistead — may I call you James? — James, I know you must be wondering what happened to that shy little child you sat with so long ago, who now races through the gardens of propriety with hobnail boots. Please forgive me if this causes you any concern, I can moderate my behavior." She took a sip of tea and then fixed me with an intense look. "I would rather not."

Unhorsed and bootless. "Miss — Evelyn. As with my hands, my ears also, and my discretion always be as you desire." Shall I risk it? Faint heart, boyo, fair lady — "Of my heart, I cannot say the same. You have no doubt divined that it was filled with love for you the day we first met. My station has never been equal to yours, but it will always be yours, whether you will it or not."

Evelyn's eyes twinkled, and a merry look came to her face much like that on the Welsh maids'. "So, Janice, did I not tell you he has a silver tongue? May I confide in him?"

"Ah! Evelyn, your servant will yield to your choice in such matters."

Truly startled, I looked at the two of them, so informal and acting like sisters considering me as if I was a promising bolt of cloth. For the first time in this madcap day, uneasiness crept along beside my thoughts.

"Then, I will, James. I want you to know that although I also fell in love with you the first day that we met, and find you no less attractive, I cannot consent to marry you."

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"Your station does not matter to me, James. Be assured, in saying that I will not marry the most considerate and well-formed of the — herd — that has gathered, I also reject any other advances more firmly. I find that I have no need for a man to guide my life. Ever. I have promised this before God, and before my true love." Owain's daughter rose to stand beside her, and they joined hands.

The horse carried away, but I still lay flat on the ground, bleeding from my ears. My lady had drawn a revolver, risen, and was walking toward me, ready to press it to my head.

I rose also — one doesn't want to die huddled in a chair like a coward — as she came forward and once again opened her arms for an embrace. "However," she murmured in my ear, "I have an urgent requirement for a fiancé to hold back the other wolves."

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